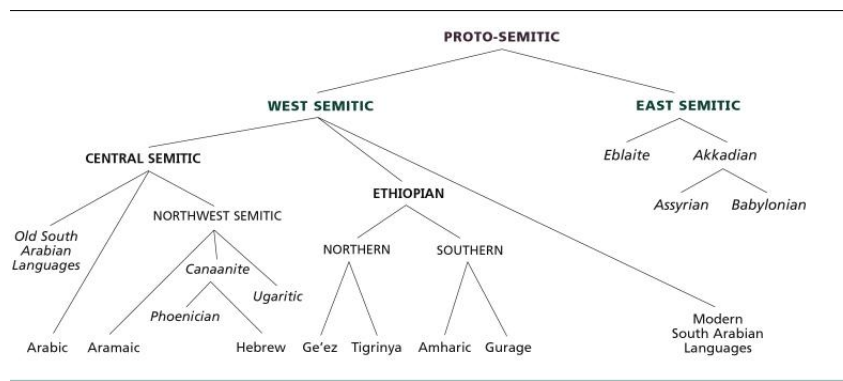


# Comparative Classical Arabic Grammar in a Nutshell

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## Historical Features

- Classical Arabic is a member of the southern branch of the Central Semitic group of languages, which in the Arabian peninsula divides into Old South Arabian or Himyarite dialects descended from Sabean, and North Arabic which forms the Bedouin forerunner to the language of the Qur’ān. Hebrew, along with Moabite and Ammonite is related to the wider Semitic family through the Northwest Semitic family of Canaanite languages. The earliest classical Arabic literature dates from the 6th century in the *jāhiliyya* poetry of pre-Islamic Arabia.



- As with Hebrew, Arabic words are based on a trilateral root system expressing a common essential meaning (eg. **ك ت ب** *k-t-b* connoting ‘writing’), with a smaller number of primitive biliteral words (eg. **د م** *dam* ‘blood’) as well as quadrilateral words which are mainly either doublings of biliterals or foreign loan words.
- Orthography is broadly the same as in Hebrew being a consonantal script with short vowels unwritten, with the addition of some extra letters representing phonemes unique to Arabic. The alphabet has evolved from Aramaic and Nabatean antecedents, developing later to the modern cursive form. The Judaeo-Arabic of medieval Jewish writers is Arabic written in Hebrew characters, though different writers used a variety of different systems of transliteration (eg. some used **א** to indicate the long *ā* in Arabic whereas others used **אָ** following Hebrew usage).

1	𐤀	𐤁	𐤂	𐤃	𐤄	𐤅	𐤆	𐤇	𐤈	𐤉	𐤊	𐤋	𐤌	𐤍	𐤎	𐤏	𐤐	𐤑	𐤒	𐤓	𐤔	𐤕	𐤖	𐤗	𐤘
2	א	ב	ג	ד	ה	ו	ז	ח	ט	י	כ	ל	מ	נ	ס	פ	צ	ק	ר	ש	ת				
3	ا	ب	ج	د	ه	و	ز	ح	ط	ي	ك	ل	م	ن	س	ع	ف	ص	ق	ر	ش	س	ط	ظ	خ
4	א	ב	ג	ד	ה	ו	ז	ח	ט	י	כ	ל	מ	נ	ס	פ	צ	ק	ר	ש	ת				
5		b	g	d	h	w	z	h	t	y	k	l	m	n	s	'	p/f	s	q	r	š	t			

1. Aramaic ; 2. Nabataean ; 3. Arabic ; 4. Syriac ; 5. Transcription

## Roots and Nouns

- As with Hebrew, the Form I perfect verbal root or *f<sup>c</sup>il* (equivalent to the *Qal*) is the simplest form of the verb – כתב *kataba* ‘he wrote’. Upon this basic root is added a number of prefixes such as מ- *m-* or suffixes such as ה *-ā* or infixes such as ת *t* or long vowels such as א י ו *ā, ī* or *ū* to generate a wide number of participle or verbal noun forms.
- While there are some pure noun forms such as כתאב *kitāb* ‘book’, there is generally a close relationship between verbs and nouns such that variants of the *fā<sup>c</sup>il* active participle and *maf<sup>c</sup>ūl* passive participle generate a large proportion of nouns – hence כתאב *kātib* ‘he is writing/writer’ and מכתוב *maktūb* ‘he or it is written/a written thing’ have both a verbal as well as nominal force. There are forms such as the *ism al-makān* or noun of place with a מ- *m* prefix, such as מכתב *maktab* ‘place of writing/office’ or מכתבה *maktaba* ‘place of writing/library’ with the feminine ending, and correspondingly the *ism al-<sup>o</sup>āla* or noun of instrument, such as מפתאח *miftāḥ* ‘instrument of opening/key’ from the verb פתח *fataḥa* ‘he opened’.
- As with Hebrew, there are two genders only, masculine and feminine, and the feminine suffix is ה *-ā* (eg. כתבה *kātiba* ‘she is writing/female writer’).
- The *raf<sup>c</sup>* nominative, *naṣb* accusative and *jarr* genitive cases of nouns are expressed by short vowels *u, a* and *i* respectively, with *tanwīn* or ‘nunation’ inflexion *-un, -an, -in* to connote the indefinite – כתאב *kitābun* ‘a book’, versus definite אלכתאב *al-kitābu* ‘the book’ which incorporates the Arabic definite article אל- *al-* with the inflected ending.
- Plurals in Arabic are somewhat more complicated than Hebrew, with both regular *al-jam<sup>c</sup> al-sālim* sound plural and irregular *al-jam<sup>c</sup> al-mukassar* broken plural forms. The sound plurals are structured similarly to Hebrew with the ending ינ-/ונ *-ūn* (nominative)/-īn (oblique) for masculine plural nouns (eg. כתבונ *kātibūna* ‘writers nom. m. pl.’) and את- *-ātu* (nominative)/ātin (oblique) for feminine plural nouns (eg. כתבתא *kātibātu* ‘writers nom. f. pl.’).

## Simple Verbs and Sentences

- For verbs, as in Hebrew, there are two tenses perfect and imperfect, declined for single, dual and plural, masculine and feminine, in a manner not dissimilar to Hebrew.
- By the use of the particle קד *qad* in conjunction with the simple perfect, a pluperfect sense is expressed – כתב קד *qad kataba* ‘he had written’.
- The imperfect is used to express both past continuous, present and future action, and this is largely determined from context or through the addition of particles such as סופ or ס- *sawfa* or *sa-* indicating future action, or in conjunction with the verb כאנ *kāna* ‘he was’ to express past imperfect action. Hence by itself, the verb כתב *yaktubu* can connote ‘he was writing’, ‘he is writing’ or ‘he will write’.

- With the addition of the appropriate particle to the sentence, **סופ יכתב** *sawfa yaktubu* clearly means ‘he will write’. Using the perfect verb **כאנ** *kāna* ‘he was’, in apposition to the imperfect verb **יכתב** *yaktubu*, the sentence **כאנ יכתב** *kāna yaktubu* clearly means ‘he was writing’.
- Syntax is broadly similar to Hebrew. In nominal sentences there is no verb ‘to be’ in the present tense, and so the syntax of a simple nominal sentence which is ordered as *mubtada* subject, followed by *khobar* predicate and then the *n<sup>c</sup>at* adjective in agreement with the noun, is identical to Hebrew – **מוסא נבי עצים** *Mūsā nabīyyun azīmūn* ‘Moses is a great prophet’ (this in an indefinite sentence and so note the *tanwīn* to indicate this). As in Hebrew, the introduction of the definite article makes the sentence an adjectival clause **מוסי אלנבי אלעצים** *Mūsā al-nabīyyu al-azīmu* ‘Moses **the** great prophet’.
- The *idāfa* or ancient construct form of Hebrew using the definite article and genitive declension to express possession is very much in use in Arabic – **בית אלכאתב** *baytu al-kātibi* ‘**the** house of the writer’.
- Historically being a more modern and extensive language, Arabic is more complex in its grammar and phrasal architecture than ancient Biblical Hebrew, and there are a variety of constructions establishing relative clauses and complex statitive or *hāl* sentences, with a variety of moods declining the verbal forms. However certain common and characteristically Semitic elements remain, such as the absence of adverbs and their expression instead through *maf<sup>c</sup>ul mutlaq* absolute object constructions – **פרה פרהא עציםא** *fariha farḥan azīman* ‘he rejoiced a great rejoicing’.

### Derived Verb Forms

- Just as there are seven verb patterns deriving from the *Qal* form in Hebrew, through *Niphal*, *Piel*, *Pual*, *Hiphil*, *Hophal* and *Hithpael*, in Arabic there are twelve derived verb forms springing from the basic *f<sup>c</sup>il* root verb (Form I), each derived form in turn giving rise to its own verbal noun or *maṣdar* as well as active and passive participles. This extraordinary variety of modulation to the basic root gives Arabic an astonishing flexibility and telegraphy of expression, and the ability to convey subtle hues and shades of meaning. Examples of the some of the most common derived forms are:
  - *fa<sup>c</sup>ala* (Form II), formed by doubling of the middle consonant, often expressing emphatic action or the rendering of an intransitive verb transitive, causative or declarative – eg. **קתל** *qatala* ‘he killed’ becomes **קתל** *qattala* ‘he massacred’, **דרס** *darasa* ‘he studied’ becomes **דרס** *darrasa* ‘he taught’.
  - *tafa<sup>c</sup>ala* (Form V), formed by adding the prefix **ת** *t-* and doubling of the middle consonant, usually expressing an intransitive verb – eg. **עלם** *‘alima* ‘he knew’ becomes **תעלם** *ta<sup>c</sup>allama* ‘he learned’.

- *fā<sup>c</sup>ala* (Form III), formed by lengthening the middle vowel with an <sup>ʾ</sup>*alif*, usually expressing interaction with another – eg. כתב *kataba* ‘he wrote’ becomes כתב *kātaba* ‘he wrote to someone’.
- *tafā<sup>c</sup>ala* (Form VI), formed by adding the prefix ת *t-* and the lengthening of the middle vowel with an <sup>ʾ</sup>*alif*, usually expressing mutual activity – eg. תכתב *takātaba* ‘he wrote (in mutual correspondence with someone)’.
- *ʾaf<sup>c</sup>ala* (Form IV), formed by adding a prefix *hamza*, often expressing the rendering of an intransitive verb transitive – eg. קאם *qāma* ‘he stood’ becomes אקאם *ʾaqāma* ‘he caused to stand/established’.
- *infa<sup>c</sup>ala* (Form VII), formed by adding the prefix נ *n-* with a liaison <sup>ʾ</sup>*alif*, often expressing reflexive or passive action – eg. כסר *kasara* ‘he broke (transitive)’ becomes אנכסר *inkasara* ‘he or it was broken’.
- *ifta<sup>c</sup>ala* (Form VIII), formed by the infixing of ת *-t-* with the addition of a liaison <sup>ʾ</sup>*alif* prefix imparts a complex variety of modulations to the meaning, sometimes passive or reflexive – eg. קתל *qatala* ‘he killed’ becomes אקתתל *iqtatata* ‘fought with one another’, סלם *salima* ‘he was safe’ becomes אסתלם *istalama* ‘he received’.
- *istaf<sup>c</sup>ala* (Form X), formed by the prefixing of the basic verb with סת *st-* with a liaison <sup>ʾ</sup>*alif* introduces the connotation of asking for the root – eg. פהם *fahima* ‘he understood’ becomes אסתפהם *istafhama* ‘he asked a question’, סלם *salima* ‘he or it was safe’ becomes אסתסלם *istaslama* ‘he surrendered’.